



Survival: Global Politics and Strategy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsur20>

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Version of record first published: 05 Dec 2008.

To cite this article: Richard A. Bitzinger & Barry Desker (2008): Why East Asian War is Unlikely, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 50:6, 105-128

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396330802601883>

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Why East Asian War is Unlikely

Richard A. Bitzinger and Barry Desker

The Asia-Pacific region can be regarded as a zone of both relative insecurity and strategic stability. It contains some of the world's most significant flashpoints – the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the Siachen Glacier – where tensions between nations could escalate to the point of major war. It is replete with unresolved border issues; is a breeding ground for transnational terrorism and the site of many terrorist activities (the Bali bombings, the Manila superferry bombing); and contains overlapping claims for maritime territories (the Spratly Islands, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands) with considerable actual or potential wealth in resources such as oil, gas and fisheries. Finally, the Asia-Pacific is an area of strategic significance with many key sea lines of communication and important chokepoints.

Yet despite all these potential crucibles of conflict, the Asia-Pacific, if not an area of serenity and calm, is certainly more stable than one might expect. To be sure, there are separatist movements and internal struggles, particularly with insurgencies, as in Thailand, the Philippines and Tibet. Since the resolution of the East Timor crisis, however, the region has been relatively free of open armed warfare. Separatism remains a challenge, but the break-up of states is unlikely. Terrorism is a nuisance, but its impact is contained. The North Korean nuclear issue, while not fully resolved, is at least moving toward a conclusion with the likely denuclearisation of the peninsula. Tensions between China and Taiwan, while always just beneath

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the surface, seem unlikely to erupt in open conflict any time soon, especially given recent Kuomintang Party victories in Taiwan and efforts by Taiwan and China to re-open informal channels of consultation as well as institutional relationships between organisations responsible for cross-strait relations. And while in Asia there is no strong supranational political entity like the European Union, there are many multilateral organisations and international initiatives dedicated to enhancing peace and stability, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the Proliferation Security Initiative and the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation. In Southeast Asia, countries are united in a common geopolitical and economic organisation – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – which is dedicated to peaceful economic, social and cultural development, and to the promotion of regional peace and stability. ASEAN has played a key role in conceiving and establishing broader regional institutions such as the East Asian Summit, ASEAN+3 (China, Japan and South Korea) and the ASEAN Regional Forum. All this suggests that war in Asia – while not inconceivable – is unlikely.

This is not to say that the region will not undergo significant changes. The rise of China constitutes perhaps the most significant challenge to regional security and stability – and, from Washington's vantage point, to American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. The United States increasingly sees China as its key peer challenger in Asia: China was singled out in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review as having, among the 'major and emerging powers ... the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States'.¹ Although the United States has been the hegemon in the Asia-Pacific since the end of the Second World War, it will probably not remain so over the next 25 years. A rising China will present a critical foreign-policy challenge, in some ways more difficult than that posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War.² While the Soviet Union was a political and strategic competitor, China will be a formidable political, strategic and economic competitor. This development will lead to profound changes in the strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific.

Still, the rise of China does not automatically mean that conflict is more likely; the emergence of a more assertive China does not mean a more

aggressive China. While Beijing is increasingly prone to push its own agenda, defend its interests, engage in more nationalistic – even chauvinistic – behaviour (witness the Olympic torch counter-protests), and seek to displace the United States as the regional hegemon, this does not necessarily translate into an expansionist or warlike China. If anything, Beijing appears content to press its claims peacefully (if forcefully) through existing avenues and institutions of international relations, particularly by co-opting these to meet its own purposes. This ‘soft power’ process can be described as an emerging ‘Beijing Consensus’ in regional international affairs. Moreover, when the Chinese military build-up is examined closely, it is clear that the country’s war machine, while certainly worth taking seriously, is not quite as threatening as some might argue.

The Beijing Consensus

Growing Chinese – and more generally, Asian – self-confidence, and the awareness that the era of US pre-eminence in East Asia is drawing to a close, is likely to give rise to a revived debate over the validity of claims for an Asian model of development and the significance of ‘Asian values’ in shaping the region’s responses to global and local developments. Chinese perspectives on the structure of international society and the norms and values underpinning the international order will be particularly influential. The Asian financial and economic crisis of 1997–98 led to the collapse of an earlier debate on Asian values, which had reflected the economic rise of East Asian states and whose leading voices included leaders and intellectuals in Malaysia and Singapore.³ Meanwhile, the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower in the post-Cold War era focused attention on the ‘Washington Consensus’ in favour of elected democracies, the sanctity of individual political and civil rights, the promotion of free trade and open markets and the recognition of doctrines of humanitarian intervention.⁴ The new debate is likely to reflect the changing power relations within East Asia and highlight alternative views on the appropriate ways and means of ordering societies, and on the role and function of regional and international institutions. A new paradigm in international affairs can be expected: the Beijing Consensus is founded on the leadership role of the authoritarian

party state, a technocratic approach to governance, the significance of social rights and obligations, a reassertion of the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference, and support for freer markets and stronger regional and international institutions.⁵ The emphasis is on effective leadership and good governance.⁶

The argument that there is an emerging Beijing Consensus is not premised on the rise of the East and decline of the West, as sometimes seemed to be the sub-text of the earlier Asian-values debate.⁷ However, like the earlier debate, the new one reflects alternative philosophical traditions. The issue is the appropriate balance between the rights of the individual and those of the state. This emerging debate will highlight the shared identity and values of China and the other states in the region, even if conventional realist analysts join John Mearsheimer to suggest that it will result in 'intense security competition with considerable potential for war' in which most of China's neighbours 'will join with the United States to contain China's power'.⁸

These shared values are likely to reduce the risk of conflict and result in regional pressure for an accommodation of and engagement with an emerging China, rather than confrontation.

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Nevertheless, a renewed emphasis on Asian values does not sit easily with some Western observers. Even European policymakers, who have sought to balance individual and community interests in their own domestic environments, have tended to be critical of the resurgent Asian societies and are sceptical that Asia can avoid duplicating the European model, which saw the continent engage in two self-destructive wars in the past century before beginning to build supranational cooperative

institutions. In particular, European observers, like American policymakers, have been critical of China's search for natural resources and raw materials, especially its support for African regimes, such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, accused of violating human rights; they have also raised questions about the export of low-cost, labour-intensive goods manufactured in sweatshop factories in China, the emergence of Chinese sovereign wealth funds as

major investors susceptible to government influence and posing a security risk, and an under-valued currency, which results in chronic balance-of-payments surpluses. These doubts have been influential at the policy level and in the public imagination. The decision by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy not to attend the opening of the 2008 Olympic Games following the Chinese crackdown on the Tibetan independence movement is likely to be read very differently in China. Although a symbolic gesture, it is being perceived as a slight on an emerging China, a spoiler at China's 'coming out' party. Similarly, frequent European criticisms of the multiplicity of regional institutions in Asia and the loosely structured cooperative arrangements reflect the European perception that Asia must follow a European path if it is to succeed in promoting functional cooperation and effective integration. However, Asian Development Bank President Haruhiko Kuroda has argued that 'a pragmatic, step-by-step, bottom-up approach to regionalism – rather than an idealistic, comprehensive, top-down pan-Asian "vision" approach as was done in Europe – is most appropriate as our economies increasingly work together'.⁹ Michèle and Henrik Schmiegelow point out that, contrary to Eurocentric notions of a potential imbalance in Asia's power politics and intractable cultural differences and nationalistic tendencies, Asian countries have taken the route of 'strategic pragmatism, a pragmatism ethically grounded in a core of trans-cultural values similar to those of the West'.¹⁰

But awareness of the influence of Western norms in international organisations and global society is leading to greater attention to individual rights and liberties. The evolution in regional thinking on the balance between individual rights and social obligations is seen most clearly in the current move to adopt an ASEAN Charter. Whereas ASEAN had resolutely emphasised sovereignty, non-intervention and non-interference in the internal affairs of states since its inception in 1967, the December 2005 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the establishment of the ASEAN Charter called for the promotion of democracy, human rights and obligations, transparency and good governance, and strengthening democratic institutions.¹¹ It will be difficult, to be sure, for ASEAN to adjust its position in the face of entrenched perspectives within the bureaucracies of the ASEAN states. This explains the

retreat from institutionalising these values as key components of the ASEAN Charter when it was promulgated at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore in November 2007.¹²

Chinese representatives are also beginning to take notice of issues of proper governance, the development of domestic institutions and the strengthening of regional institutional mechanisms. Following the negative reaction to the Chinese government's media blackout during the 2003 SARS epidemic and the recognition that media scrutiny could lead to more effective governance, especially in cases of official corruption and mismanagement at the local and provincial levels, a leading Chinese legal specialist, Cai Dingjian, argued that China's social transformation demanded a free and responsible press. He noted that the new version of the Emergency Response Law deleted the provision under which news media were barred from reporting on emergencies without official authorisation.¹³ Wang Jisi, a prominent Chinese scholar, also published an article in 2007 calling for a more individualistic and democratic society.¹⁴ While Chinese governments enforced a veil of secrecy during previous major natural disasters and declined international offers of assistance, the responsiveness of the Chinese government the devastating May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan and its openness to international rescue teams highlighted changing Chinese attitudes towards its responsibilities to its citizens, as well as greater awareness of international norms and values. The positive Chinese stance contrasted with the foot-dragging of Burmese authorities, who were slow to respond to international appeals for entry into Myanmar to provide humanitarian assistance following Cyclone Nargis.¹⁵

There are other signs that Chinese policy is changing, even on the issue of sovereignty. For example, there has been an evolution in Chinese thinking on the question of freedom of passage through the Malacca and Singapore straits. While China supported the claims of the littoral states to sovereign control over the straits when the Law of the Sea Convention was concluded in 1982, China's increasing dependence on imported oil shipped through the straits has led to a shift in favour of burden-sharing, the recognition of the rights of user states and the need for cooperation between littoral states and user states. China was the first to commit to several projects pro-

posed in the Cooperative Mechanism to be set up under the auspices of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), offering to replace all navigational aids destroyed by the 2004 tsunami as well as jointly offering with the United States to support work on preparedness for hazardous-material spills.¹⁶ China has also shown interest in transit passage by naval vessels through the straits, reflecting the emergence of the Chinese navy's 'blue water' ambitions. The early Chinese commitment to burden-sharing under the IMO Cooperative Mechanism indicates that Chinese policy on the role of international institutions is being increasingly influenced by its global interests and global engagement. As a rising power, China recognises the benefits of stronger multilateral institutions and seeks greater influence in global governance.

China's engagement with global and regional institutions has resulted in revisions to its earlier advocacy of strict non-intervention and non-interference. Chinese support for global initiatives in counter-terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, anti-drug trafficking and AIDS prevention; its general reluctance to exercise its veto as a permanent member of the UN Security Council; and its active role within the World Trade Organisation since its accession to membership indicate that China is aware that responsible participation in global institutions can be influential in shaping perceptions of its rise. While China avoided participating in peacekeeping operations in the first two decades following its admission to the United Nations in 1971, it has engaged in 15 operations since the 1990s, including Cambodia, East Timor and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It has also increasingly supported UN disaster-relief operations, both financially and by sending emergency-relief teams.

China's rapid emergence as a global economic power has resulted in increasing informal influence as other states attempt to accommodate Chinese interests and concerns. Expanding Chinese trade and investment ties, as well as the relocation of Western and Asian manufacturing capabilities to China, has resulted in an increasingly economically interdependent China that is part of a network of integrated global manufacturing operations. China has also participated actively in cooperative regional institutions, winning new friends and disarming old adversaries. The focus in China's

regional relationships has been on maintaining regional economic growth and facilitating China's integration into regional and global affairs.

Reinforcing the Beijing Consensus has been the emergence within the Chinese leadership of a more nuanced and sophisticated foreign policy

Beijing has launched a major 'charm offensive'

toward neighbouring countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. In some cases, such as Vietnam or Indonesia, suspicions of Chinese intent and actions have been long and lingering, yet relations between China and most countries in the region have improved remarkably in recent years and have probably never been better. For example, trade between China and Southeast Asia has increased dramatically, and Beijing has become a major investor in and aid

donor to such countries as Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam, in addition to maintaining close ties to such traditional client-states as Myanmar.¹⁷

Moreover, Beijing has simultaneously launched a major 'charm offensive' in Southeast Asia designed to show countries in the region that it is a non-confrontational, status quo power. In a dramatic departure from its earlier belligerent and ham-fisted manner in pressing Chinese national interests, Beijing, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, now

makes special efforts to assure its neighbors that it is a responsible and constructive partner. It has agreed to codes of conduct where territorial disputes have economic consequences (as in the South China Sea); it has begun negotiations to resolve border disputes that involved important neighbors such as India; it has started to take its non-proliferation obligations much more seriously than before ... and it has expressed a willingness to shelve active political disputes that cannot be reconciled immediately, so long as none of the other parties involved disturbs the status quo (e.g., Taiwan). In general, China has refocused its energies on expanding trade and cooperation with all its neighbours.¹⁸

China was the first non-Southeast Asian state to sign the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003. This agreement has been paired with the

ASEAN–China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Security, also signed in 2003, and followed up by a ‘Plan for Action’ agreed to in 2004.¹⁹ China is also a participant in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ARF Security Policy Conference, the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN+3 meetings. As a participant in these regional institutions, China’s approach has shifted from an emphasis on promoting narrow national-interest concerns to support for greater institutionalisation and the strengthening of functional cooperation. While ASEAN has arguably been the catalyst for the establishment of these regional institutions, China has used them to manage its relationships with ASEAN, India and Japan.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this new ‘play-nice’ strategy and good-neighbour approach more tangible than in China’s recent handling of the Spratly Islands dispute. From its supposed flashpoint status during the 1990s, the Spratlys have calmed down considerably, and today the status of the islands is ‘no longer discussed as a major security concern’.²⁰ To its credit, China has made a concerted effort *not* to let the South China Sea issue become a major domestic political football (unlike the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan), nor has it seized or occupied additional islands in the Spratlys since 1995. In particular, in 2002 Beijing and ASEAN agreed to a joint Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which affirmed the intention of the signatories to peacefully resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes, to exercise self-restraint in the South China Sea and to avoid actions that would ‘complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability’, including refraining from further construction on the presently uninhabited islands. In addition, in March 2005 Beijing also signed bilateral agreements with the Philippines and Vietnam for the joint exploration for oil in areas of overlapping sovereignty claims. (At the same time, estimates of likely oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea have been revised downward considerably, so there may be much less to fight over than originally believed.) This is not to say that the Spratly Islands dispute has been settled once and for all (fishing rights, for example, will continue to be important). It does stand a much better chance of being resolved peacefully, however, and without adding to tensions or hostility between China and Southeast Asia.²¹

Finally, Beijing has greatly lowered the tone and rhetoric of its strategic competition with the United States, which has gone a long way toward reassuring the countries of Southeast Asia of China's sincerity in pursuing a non-confrontational foreign and security strategy. Beijing's approach is significant, as most Southeast Asian states prefer not to have to choose between alignment with the United States and alignment with China, and have adopted 'hedging' strategies in their relationships with the two powers. Beijing now pursues a much more subtle approach toward Washington: not directly challenging US leadership in Asia, partnering with Washington where the two countries have shared interests and, above all, promoting multilateral security processes that, in turn, work toward diluting or constraining US power, influence and hegemony in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere.²²

Hard power: the Chinese military challenge

While there have been perceptible shifts in Beijing's approach to foreign policy in recent years, it is no exaggeration to say that during the same period China has made significant strides in the military realm. The country is currently engaged in a determined effort to transform its military from an army based on Mao Zedong's principles of mass-oriented, infantry-heavy 'People's War' to what many observers perceive to be an agile, high-tech force capable of projecting power throughout the Asia-Pacific. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is in the midst of perhaps the most ambitious upgrading of its combat capabilities since the early 1960s, and is adding both quantitatively and qualitatively to its arsenal of military equipment.

The PLA's current national-defence doctrine is centred on the ability to fight 'Limited Local Wars under Conditions of "Informatization"'.²³ This means short-duration, high-intensity conflicts characterised by mobility, speed and long-range attack; joint operations fought simultaneously throughout the entire air, land, sea, space and electromagnetic battlespace; and heavy reliance upon extremely lethal high-technology weapons. PLA operations also increasingly emphasise pre-emption, surprise and shock value, given that the earliest stages of a conflict may be crucial to the outcome of a war.

There is general agreement that, since the late 1990s, the PLA has been engaged in a concerted effort to replace and upgrade its military hardware. Even official Chinese defence budgets – which almost certainly under-report actual expenditures – show that funding for the procurement of new military equipment has risen more than six-fold between 1997 and 2008, from \$3.1 billion to approximately US\$20bn per year. Moreover, arms purchases from abroad – especially Russia – have exploded over the past decade. Between 1998 and 2005 Beijing signed new arms-import agreements worth some \$16.7bn, according to the US Congressional Research Service; in 2005 alone, it purchased \$2.8bn worth of foreign weapon systems.²⁴

The PLA has acquired or is in the process of acquiring a number of new high-tech weapons systems, including fourth-generation fighter aircraft, large surface combatants, new nuclear and diesel-electric attack submarines, precision-guided munitions (including land-attack cruise missiles and supersonic anti-ship missiles), airborne early-warning aircraft, air-to-air refuelling aircraft and improved air defences. China also puts unique emphasis on the use of tactical ballistic missiles for precision strikes against land and sea targets. Of particular note, the PLA is forming a core of approximately a dozen division- or brigade-sized rapid-reaction units, including three airborne, four amphibious or marine divisions, and several special operations units – shock troops that could be used for a variety of regional contingencies (particularly against Taiwan) or even operate out-of-area.²⁵

For its part, the PLA Air Force is acquiring up to several hundred modern Su-27 and Su-30 fighter aircraft from Russia, and will soon be taking delivery of the new indigenous J-10 ‘fourth generation-plus’ fighter jet; these planes are being equipped with new standoff air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions. The air force has also purchased AA-12 active-radar-guided air-to-air missiles for its Su-27s, while some Su-30s will be equipped with the Russian-made Kh-31 supersonic anti-ship cruise missile. The Chinese are also buying additional transport and air-to-air refuelling aircraft and strengthening their airborne assault forces.²⁶

The PLA Navy has greatly increased its procurement of large surface combatants and submarines over the past decade. It has acquired 12 *Kilo*-class submarines and four *Sovremennyy*-class destroyers (armed with supersonic

anti-ship cruise missiles) from Russia, as well as a navalised version of the Russian Su-30 fighter-bomber. There also has been a significant expansion in Chinese naval shipbuilding. Since 2000, China has constructed six destroyers of three different types; at least six frigates, including a new stealthy design (of which up to 30 may eventually be built); up to 16 diesel-electric submarines (*Ming*-, *Song*-, and *Yuan*-classes); and at least three nuclear-powered submarines (including one ballistic-missile submarine).²⁷

Additionally, the navy is starting to expand its capabilities for power projection and expeditionary warfare. China has recently launched the Type-071 amphibious-warfare ship, equipped with two helicopters and two air-cushioned landing craft, and capable of carrying up to 800 troops; up to eight could eventually be built, and they could be complemented by a new, larger amphibious-assault ship.²⁸ In addition, rumours persist that the navy will add at least one aircraft carrier to its fleet by 2015–20.²⁹ Finally, the

PLA is building up its arsenal of conventional missile systems, including reportedly developing a medium-range missile with an anti-ship capability, mostly likely for use against large warships, such as aircraft carriers.³⁰

China's strategic-missile forces have been greatly upgraded in recent years by the deployment of the new CSS-4/DF-5 Mod 2 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). In addition, the Chinese are developing a solid-propellant, road-mobile ICBM which will

likely be deployed in the next few years, an improved, longer-range version and a submarine-launched version. The US Defense Department estimates that the number of Chinese ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States could rise significantly, from around 20 missiles at the beginning of this decade to perhaps 100 or more by 2010 – some of which could be fitted with multiple warheads.³¹

The PLA is also building up its arsenal of conventional missile systems, including the 600-kilometre-range CSS-6 and 300-kilometre-range CSS-7 short-range ballistic missiles, and, in particular, adding a new category of land-attack cruise missile. The US Defense Department estimates that

China's strategic-missile forces have been greatly upgraded

up to 1,000 short-range ballistic missiles are presently deployed opposite Taiwan, and that China is deploying an additional 75–100 each year. Many of these missile systems are being fitted with satellite-navigation guidance for improved accuracy, and with new types of warheads (such as cluster submunitions and fuel-air explosives) for higher lethality.³²

China is combining these force-modernisation efforts with actions intended to increase professionalisation and interoperability within its armed forces. PLA officers are receiving increased training and education, while recent military exercises have emphasised amphibious warfare with ‘limited multi-service participation’. Air force and naval air force training now devotes more time to supporting amphibious operations, while ground forces are increasingly integrating training and exercises with maritime, air-borne and special-operations forces.

Many in the West have argued that this overall modernisation process constitutes an effort to engage in a ‘revolution in military affairs’, defined as a process of discontinuous, disruptive and revolutionary change that radically alters the way militaries fight. ‘Informatisation’ represents a potentially critical – and revolutionary – transformation in the PLA’s warfighting strategy, implying a fundamental shift away from platform-centric toward network-centric warfare.³³ In particular, the Chinese are reportedly trying to exploit informatisation and ‘knowledge-based warfare’ in order to leapfrog weapons development, accelerate the pace of military modernisation, and create new levers of military power. According to You Ji, the PLA is currently engaged – as part of an ambitious ‘generation-leap’ strategy – in a ‘double construction’ transformational effort of simultaneously pursuing both the mechanisation and ‘informatisation’ of its armed forces.³⁴ Initially, therefore, the PLA is attempting to upgrade its current arsenal of conventional ‘industrial-age’ weapons through improved communications systems, new sensors and seekers, greater precision, night-vision capabilities, and so on.

Concurrently, and in accordance with the principles of informatisation, the Chinese military has put considerable emphasis on upgrading its command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C⁴ISR) assets. This includes launching a constellation of communication, surveillance and navigation satellites, while also devel-

oping its capabilities to wage 'integrated network electronic warfare' – an amalgam of electronic warfare (jamming the enemy's communications and intelligence-gathering assets), offensive information warfare (disrupting the enemy's computer networks), and physical attacks on the enemy's C⁴SIR network.³⁵ US writings on the PLA have devoted considerable attention to China's pursuit of weapons for asymmetric warfare – sometimes called 'assassin's mace' or 'trump card' weapons. Some of these are intended to attack an enemy's vulnerabilities, as in computer-network attacks. Others are basically 'old wine in new bottles' – that is, already existing programmes seen as the most effective weapons in the PLA's arsenal whose development or deployment has been accelerated, and 'new concept' arms, such as kinetic-energy weapons (including railguns), lasers, radio-frequency and high-powered microwave weapons, and anti-satellite systems.

Ultimately, the PLA hopes to turn itself into a modern, network-enabled fighting force, capable of projecting sustained power throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Consequently, long-term trends in Chinese military modernisation have the potential, in the US Defense Department's words, to 'pose credible threats to modern militaries operating in the region'.³⁶ Ironically, the PLA, more than any other armed force in the Asia-Pacific region, appears to have mimicked the United States in terms of the ambition and scope of its own transformational efforts – and therefore has begun to challenge the US military at its own game.³⁷

Assessing the threat

Overall, most Western assessments agree that the PLA has made considerable progress over the past decade in adding new weapons to its arsenal, and that China has noticeably improved its military capabilities in several specific areas – particularly missile attack, power projection over sea and in the air, and information warfare. Most predict that Chinese military power relative to its likely competitors in the Asia-Pacific region – especially Taiwan – and the United States will continue to increase significantly over the next ten to 20 years. There are, however, some striking differences of opinion when it comes to interpreting the significance of these hardware developments. Many Western analysts assert that the PLA continues to suffer from consid-

erable deficiencies and weaknesses that limit its ability to constitute a major military threat: in spite of all its efforts, China is still at least two decades behind the United States in terms of defence capabilities and technology. In particular, the PLA still lacks the logistical and lift capacity – both by sea and by air – for projecting force much beyond its borders. China also lags far behind the West in areas such as C⁴I architectures and surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. Some therefore argue that China's current rearmament programme is an incremental, long-term modernisation process that must be understood in the context of competing force-modernisation activities taking place among China's likely rivals.

Moreover, what the PLA has been engaged in over the past 10–15 years may not really be a revolution in military affairs at all. First, there is very little evidence that the Chinese military is engaged in an revolutionary overhaul of its organisational or institutional structures. According to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, the PLA, despite its emphasis on the 'importance of information technology and knowledge-based warfare on the battlefield ... has yet to promulgate a definitive military doctrine to guide the development of capabilities and operations in this area'.³⁸ Most of China's ground forces remain traditional infantry units, hobbled by a shortage of rapid-mobility assets such as helicopters, airlift or amphibious lift.³⁹ The PLA's highly hierarchical and top-down command structure and its inter-service compartmentalisation does not seem to have changed, and even the Pentagon acknowledges the PLA's deficiencies when it comes to things like interoperability.⁴⁰

Secondly, while the Chinese military is certainly acquiring new and better equipment, little of it could be construed as particularly revolutionary, or be seen as leapfrogging a generation of weapons development. For example, using short- and medium-range ballistic missiles as precision-attack systems may be a unique approach, but in China's case this may be more a matter of making a virtue out of a necessity – the PLA simply lacks sufficient numbers of other types of precision-guided munitions, particularly for land attack. In addition, systems such as the J-10 fighter jet, the *Song*-class diesel-electric submarine and the Type-52C *Luyang* II-class destroyer (which is equipped with an *Aegis*-type air-defence radar), while advanced for the PLA, are basically 1980s-era weaponry, technologically speaking. The J-10, for instance,

is operationally comparable to the US F-16C, which first entered service in the mid 1980s. Even the equipment the Chinese have acquired from Russia (Su-27 fighters, *Sovremennyy*-class destroyers, *Kilo*-class submarines, and S-300 surface-to-air missiles) – arguably the sharpest edges of the PLA spear – are hardly cutting-edge, transformational weapons systems. Moreover, most Chinese weapons systems coming online today were developed more or less sequentially – that is, following traditional patterns of incremental research and development. For example, Chinese fighter-aircraft development has moved in a fairly routine fashion from second-generation (J-7/MiG-21) to third-generation (J-8) to fourth-generation (J-10) systems – acknowledging, of course, the 20-year period of near-total absence of new research from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s. Overall, therefore, Chinese military transformation looks fairly mundane, consisting mostly of buying new platforms, such as fighter jets, warships, submarines, missile systems, tanks and other weapons.

Thirdly, modernisation does not seem to be accelerating. Indeed, over the past few years the pace of PLA arms acquisitions has declined in some areas. The Chinese have not laid down a new destroyer in more than three years. In 2006 and 2007, Chinese overseas arms purchases were worth, respectively, \$100 million and \$150m, a far cry from the \$2.8bn-worth of foreign weapons systems it bought in 2005. The most recent edition of the US Defense Department's annual report on Chinese military power shows that, while the PLA has made considerable progress in incorporating 'modern' weapons systems into its forces, as of 2007, 70% of its surface combatants, 60% of its submarine force and 80% of its fighter jets were still considered 'old'.⁴¹ Clearly, Chinese military modernisation has a long way to go.

Fourthly, it is worth noting that Chinese military modernisation efforts are still embryonic or experimental, and Western observers possess only a vague idea as to the PLA's intentions and progress in many areas of informatisation, such as information warfare or digitisation, or whether these programmes will ever be effectively implemented. The PLA still possesses no centralised C⁴ISR infrastructure, and has an incomplete foundation for networking, leading to poor interoperability.⁴²

Fifthly, recapitalising the Chinese military with modern equipment, and in particular pursuing improvements in C⁴ISR, does not in and of itself constitute a revolution in military affairs; on the contrary, acquiring these systems makes perfect sense even without worrying about transformation.

Finally, it is possible that PLA transformation may turn out to be much less revolutionary in practice. According to Dennis Blasko, the current concept of limited, informationalised war is, in many ways, People's War adapted to twenty-first-century requirements and capabilities. He argues that

the Chinese see no contradiction in using the most advanced weapons and technology available to them in conjunction with existing, often antiquated, weaponry to fight a Local War on China's border using the principles of People's War. People's War is still often referred to as China's 'secret weapon.'⁴³

In particular, he points out that while the PLA appreciates the effectiveness of such transformational concepts as information warfare and massed, conventional missile attack, it does *not* see these weapons in and of themselves as decisive in battle. Blasko quotes the PLA officer's training manual, which states that 'in the employment of forces, one should mainly rely on high tech "magic weapons" ... while at the same time maximizing one's superiority in conducting a People's War'.⁴⁴

On the whole, the PLA seems to have done a good job adopting the rhetoric of transformation while pursuing a 'modernisation-plus' approach. China's current military build-up is ambitious and far-reaching, but is indicative of evolutionary, steady-state and sustaining, rather than disruptive or revolutionary, innovation and change. Forget leapfrogging – the Chinese are simply playing catch-up.

*PLA transformation
may be less
revolutionary in
practice*

While the situation in the Asia-Pacific is relatively stable, the region still faces underlying uncertainties and long-term challenges that should not be taken lightly.⁴⁵ Today's peaceful order cannot be taken for granted, and while war in Asia is unlikely, it is by no means impossible. The rise of great powers and their relations with existing hegemonies have been marked by violence throughout history. The emergence of China as a peer competitor to the United States in the Asia-Pacific over the next two decades will test this precedent. If China's rise is to be an exception, it will stand alongside the Anglo-American transition at the end of the nineteenth century as a fascinating case study of peaceful transition. However, China's emergence as a great power is far from assured. Political and economic uncertainties abound. If China were to become mired in serious difficulties, this would pose grave security and economic challenges for the region. Preparing for this scenario is no less important than addressing the more likely future with China as a major, possibly predominant, regional actor.

It is also unwise to downplay the rise of China as a military, and not just an economic and political, power. Even if the PLA is not undergoing a full-blown transformation, it is adding considerably to its conventional combat capabilities. There is particularly worrisome military potential in the PLA's experimental (but still nascent) abilities to wage offensive information warfare against technology-dependent adversaries such as the United States. For better or worse, the PLA is emerging as a much more potent military force, and that, in turn, will increasingly complicate regional security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

It is imperative that China become involved in the web of regional multi-lateral institutions being created in the Asia-Pacific – including ASEAN+3, the East Asian Summit and APEC – as well as become a stakeholder in international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation. Each time China interacts with these institutions, it is socialised and influenced by their norms and values, even as its own values and disposition shape them in turn. The long-term question is whether there is an emerging clash of values between the norms advocated by the United States, the hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific since the Second World War, and those advo-

cated by China, or whether it is possible to have a synthesis of American and Chinese values.

The challenge will be to create a global consensus that will permit the peaceful rise of East Asian states in an atmosphere of cooperation, rather than confrontation and conflict. While liberal democracies may not go to war with one another, they do have a propensity to go to war with states that do not meet their test of democracy, as such wars are popular with domestic opinion provided that easy victories can be secured. Liberal democracies will need to exercise self-restraint, even as emerging powers act in a manner that departs from liberal ideals. Global institutions could be strengthened by making these institutions representative of East and West, with norms, values and practices derived from the best of Eastern and Western traditions. Such institutions could be an avenue for consensus building and global governance, providing for the peaceful meeting of East and West and the management of global relationships in the twenty-first century.

Notes

- ¹ US Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 6 February 2006), p. 29.
- ² For more on the rise of China, see Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).
- ³ See Daniel A. Bell, *East Meets West* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) for a well-researched analysis of this debate. Also see Alan Chong, 'Singaporean Foreign Policy and the Asian Values Debate, 1992–2000: Reflections on an Experiment in Soft Power', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, March 2004, pp. 95–133. Some examples of articles by protagonists in this debate include Nordin Sopiee, 'The Development of an East Asian Consciousness', in G. Sheridan (ed.), *Living with Dragons: Australia Confronts its Asian Destiny* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995); Kishore Mahbubani, 'The Pacific Way', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 1, January–February 1995, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19950101facomment5012/kishore-mahbubani/the-pacific-way.html>; Tommy Koh, 'Does East Asia Stand for Any Positive Values?', *International Herald Tribune*, 11–12 December 1993; Tommy Koh, 'The 10 Values which Undergird East Asian Strength and Success', *International Herald Tribune*, 11–12 December 1993, p. 6. Also see the comments of Lee Kuan Yew, 'Society vs. the Individual', *Time*, 14 June 1993; Fareed Zakaria,

'Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2, March–April 1994, <http://www.fareedzakaria.com/articles/other/culture.html>; Mahathir Mohamad's address at the Asia-Pacific Management Forum on Asian Values and International Respect, 21 May 1996, <http://www.apmforum.com/news/apmn21.htm>.

- 4 For more on the Washington Consensus see John Williamson, 'Democracy and the "Washington Consensus"', *World Development*, vol. 21, no. 8, August 1993, pp. 1329–36; Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stainslaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999); John Williamson, '"Did the Washington Consensus Fail?" Outline of Remarks at CSIS', Institute for International Economics, Washington DC, 6 November 2002, www.southamericastudytrip.com/study_abroad_class_resources/Intro-Did+the+Washington+Consensus+Fail.doc. Williamson and other proponents used the term 'Washington Consensus' to describe a set of economic policies including 'macro-economic discipline, a market economy and openness to the world (at least in respect of trade and FDI)'. Its critics, including Joseph Stiglitz (See Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002)), contended that these neo-liberal economic policies were imposed by the Washington-based financial institutions on developing

countries in the 1990s. However, we are broadening the use of the term to highlight the political agenda favoured by Washington in its interactions with developing countries.

- 5 Joshua Cooper Ramo was the first to discuss the idea of a Beijing Consensus in his paper 'The Beijing Consensus', The Foreign Policy Centre, London, May 2004, <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/244.pdf>. He highlighted innovation-led growth, sustainable and equitable development and self-determination. We have broadened the use of the term to highlight the relationship between Beijing's political and economic agendas.
- 6 It should be noted that although Western political leaders such as US President George W. Bush emphasise Japan's example as a liberal democracy, the dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party for almost the entire post-war era suggests that Japan fits easily into this paradigm.
- 7 The analysis in this section was first presented by Barry Desker in the first Michael Hintze Lecture delivered at the inauguration of the Centre for International Security Studies, University of Sydney, 26 July 2007.
- 8 John J. Mearsheimer, 'China's Unpeaceful Rise', *Current History*, vol. 105, no. 690, April 2006, p. 160.
- 9 Speech by Haruhiko Kuroda, 'Challenges for the Asian Economy in 2008 and Beyond', Asian Development Bank Institute Symposium, 8 February 2008, <http://www.adbi.org/speeches/2008/02/08/2474.speech.kuroda.cae.2008.symposium/>.
- 10 Henrik Schmiegelow and Michèle Schmiegelow, 'Asia's International

Order – How the Most Dynamic Region will Influence the Shape of World Affairs', *Internationale Politik*, Autumn 2007, http://www.schmiegelow-partners.com/download/3_Schmiegelow.pdf. Also see by the same authors: 'The Road to an Asian Community – How Asia's Actors Are Promoting Integration and Why We Should Take Note'. A version of this paper can be found at <http://policyanalysis.wordpress.com/2007/11/12/why-europeans-discount-asias-integration-wrongly/>.

- 11 See 'Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit, Kuala Lumpur', 14 December 2005, <http://www.aseansec.org/18098.htm>.

- 12 The text of the ASEAN Charter can be found at <http://www.aseansec.org/ASEAN-Charter.pdf>.

- 13 *Beijing Review*, 26 July 2007, pp. 16–17.

- 14 Wang Jisi, 'Toward a More Self-Confident Chinese Nation', *Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao)*, 3 September 2007.

- 15 See S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 'A Tale of Two Disasters', *NTS Alert*, May 2008/2, <http://www.rsis-ntsasia.org/resources/publications/e-news/nts-alert/may%202008-2.pdf>. Indeed, the way in which the region handles Myanmar's lack of commitment to the restoration of democracy and the upholding of human rights will be a key test of the emerging East Asian perspective. Presently, Myanmar's bilateral political and economic relationships with China, India and Thailand, and its membership of a significant caucus within ASEAN composed of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, have

allowed it to ignore pressures from the West for even symbolic liberalisation measures such as the release of democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi from house detention. The patience of older ASEAN members is now being strained, especially in light of Myanmar's lack of progress on its commitments to implement its road map for democracy and the international criticism of ASEAN arising from the callous disregard of Myanmar's leadership for the suffering of its citizens in the aftermath of the May 2008 cyclone. However, while ASEAN states have become more vocal in recent years, and China has raised concerns privately, neither ASEAN nor China has much influence on the Burmese government. See Tin Maung Maung, 'Myanmar: Challenges Galore but Opposition Fails' and Bruce Matthew, 'Myanmar's Human and Economic Crisis and Its Regional Implications', both in Daljit Singh and Lorraine C. Salazar (eds), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2006* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006). Also see Christopher B. Roberts, 'Myanmar and the Argument for Engagement: A Clash of Contending Moralities?', IDSS Working Paper, no. 108, 2006, available at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?lng=en&id=27143>.

- 16 Efthimios E. Mitropoulos, 'Enhancing Safety, Security and Environmental Protection', Opening Address by the Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organisation at the Meeting on the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, Singapore, 4 September 2007; 'Milestone Agreement Reached on Cooperation over the

- Straits of Malacca and Singapore', 18 September 2007, http://www.imo.org/Newsroom/mainframe.asp?topic_id=1472&doc_id=8471.
- 17 Ian Storey, 'China and Vietnam's Tug of War over Laos', *China Brief*, vol. 5, no. 13, 7 June 2005, http://jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=408&issue_id=3358&article_id=2369847; Ian Storey, 'China and the Philippines: Moving Beyond the South China Sea Dispute', *China Brief*, vol. 6, no. 17, 16 August 2006, http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=415&issue_id=3837&article_id=2371392; Ian Storey, 'Progress and Remaining Obstacles in Sino-Indonesian Relations', *China Brief*, vol. 5, no. 18, 16 August 2005, <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373126>; Robert Karniol, 'Country Briefing: Vietnam – Off the Ground', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 22 December 2005.
 - 18 'China's Grand Strategy', IISS *Strategic Comments*, vol. 10, no. 9, November 2004.
 - 19 'China, America, and Southeast Asia: Hedge and Tack', IISS *Strategic Comments*, vol. 11, issue 1, February 2005.
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 - 22 David Shambaugh, 'China and Europe: The Emerging Axis', *Current History*, September 2004, p. 246.
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- 23 'Chapter II: National Defense Policy', *China's National Defense in 2004* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2004).
 - 24 Richard F. Grimmett, *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1998–2005* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 23 October 2006), pp. 17, 56.
 - 25 Timothy Hu, 'China – Marching Forward', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 25 April 2007.
 - 26 Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 69–70, 160–2.
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 - 28 O'Rourke, 'PLAN Force Structure', p. 19; Sinodefence.com, 'Type 071 Landing Platform Dock', 5 June 2008, <http://www.sinodefence.com/navy/amphibious/type071.asp>.
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- 32 Timothy Hu, 'Country Briefing – China: Ready, Steady, Go...'.
33 You Ji, 'China's Emerging National Defense Strategy', *China Brief*, vol. 4, no. 23, 24 November 2004, http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=395&issue_id=3152&article_id=2368905.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*; Wendell Minnick, 'China Shifts Spending Focus to Info War', *Defense News*, 11 September 2006.
- 36 Office the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2006* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2006), p. i.
- 37 See Richard A. Bitzinger, 'US Defense Transformation and the Asia-Pacific Region: Implications and Responses', Australian Strategy Policy Institute, 2006.
- 38 Timothy Hu, 'China – Marching Forward,' *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 25 April 2007.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Office the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2007* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2007), p. 15.
- 41 Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2008* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2008), p. 34.
- 42 You Ji, 'China's Emerging National Defense Strategy'.
- 43 Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today*, p. 95.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 45 This section is adapted from Barry Desker, 'Managing Global Risk with a Rising China', a paper prepared for the Fifth IISS Global Strategic Review, Geneva, Switzerland, September 2007, and from Richard A. Bitzinger, 'China's "Revolution in Military Affairs": Rhetoric Versus Reality', *China Brief*, vol. 8, no. 5, 29 February 2008, http://www.jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2374006.

